

HOW HELEN KELLER WAS TAUGHT SPEECH

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VOLTA BUREAU,  
FOR THE INCREASE AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE RELATING TO THE DEAF  
WASHINGTON CITY, U. S. A.

REPRINTS OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

No. 47.

# How Helen Keller was Taught Speech

From the Original Accounts in Helen Keller Souvenir, No. 1 ;  
the Report of the Proceedings of the First Summer Meeting of  
the A. A. P. T. S. D., 1891 ; Supplemented, 1903, by the  
Author in the Boston Public School Document, No. 3.

WASHINGTON, D. C. :  
PRESS OF GIBSON BROTHERS.  
1905.



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## STATEMENT OF MISS SARAH FULLER, PRINCIPAL OF THE HORACE MANN SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF.

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The first intimation to me of Helen Keller's desire to speak was on the 26th of March, 1890, when her teacher, Miss Sullivan, called upon me with her and asked me to help her to teach Helen to speak; for, said she, "Helen has spelled upon her fingers, 'I must speak.''" She was then within three months of being ten years old. Some two years before, accompanied by her mother, Mr. Anagnos and Miss Sullivan, she had visited the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, when her ready use of English, and her interest in the children, had suggested to me that she could be taught to speak. But it was not then thought wise to allow her to use her vocal organs. Now, however, that the attempt was to be made, I gladly undertook the work. I began by familiarizing her with the position and condition of the various mouth parts, and with the trachea. This I did by passing her hand lightly over the lower part of my face and by putting her fingers into my mouth. I then placed my tongue in the position for the sound of *ī* in it, and let her find the point, as it lay perfectly still and soft in the bed of the jaw, just behind the lower front teeth, and discover that the teeth were slightly parted. After she had done this I placed one of her forefingers upon my teeth and the other upon my throat, or trachea, at the lowest point where it may be felt, and repeated the sound *ī* several times. During this time, Helen, standing in front of me in the attitude of one listening intently, gave the closest attention to every detail; and when I ceased making the sound her fingers flew to her mouth and throat, and after arranging her

tongue and teeth she uttered the sound ĭ so nearly like that I had made, it seemed like an echo of it. When told she had given the sound correctly she repeated it again and again. I next showed her, by means of her sensitive fingers, the depression through the centre of the tongue when in position for the sound of ä and the opening between the teeth during the utterance of that sound. Again she waited with her fingers upon my teeth and throat until I sounded ä several times, and then she gave the vowel fairly well. A little practice enabled her to give it perfectly. We then repeated the sound of ĭ and contrasted it with ä. Having these two differing positions well fixed in her mind I illustrated the position of the tongue and lips while sounding the vowel ô. She experimented with her own mouth, and soon produced a clear, well-defined ô. After acquiring this she began to ask what the sounds represented, and if they were words. I then told her that ĭ is one of the sounds of the letter i, that ä is one of the sounds of the letter a, and that some letters have many different sounds, but that it would not be difficult for her to think of these sounds after she had learned to speak words. I next took the position for ä, Helen following as before with her fingers, and, while sounding the vowel, slowly closed my lips, producing the word *arm*. Without hesitation she arranged her tongue, repeated the sounds, and was delighted to know that she had pronounced a word. Her teacher suggested to her that she should let me hear her say the words *mamma* and *papa*, which she had tried to speak before coming to me. She quickly and forcibly said, “*mum mum*” and “*pup pup!*” I commended her efforts, and said that it would be better to speak very softly, and to sound one part of the word longer than she did the other. I then illustrated what I wanted her to understand, by pronouncing the word *mamma* very delicately, and at the same time drawing my

finger along the back of her hand to show the relative length of the two syllables. After a few repetitions the words *mamma* and *papa* came with almost musical sweetness from her lips.

This was her first lesson. She had but ten lessons in all, although she was with me at other times talking freely, but not under instruction. The plan was to develop, at each lesson, new elements, review those previously learned, listen to all of the combinations she could make with the consonants as initial and final elements, and construct sentences with the words resulting from the combinations. In the intervals between the lessons she practised these with Miss Sullivan. She was an ideal pupil, for she followed every direction with the utmost care, and seemed never to forget anything told her. On the day she had her seventh lesson (April 19th) she and Miss Sullivan were invited with me to lunch at the house of a friend. While on the way there Miss Sullivan remarked that she wished Helen would use the sentences she had learned, and added that she seemed unwilling to do so. It at once occurred to me that the cause of her reluctance was her conscientious care to pronounce every word perfectly; and so, in the moments I had with her during the visit, I encouraged her to talk freely with me while I refrained from making corrections. This had the desired effect. In going about the house of our friend she asked a great many questions, using speech constantly. In the presence of all she told of her studies, her home, and her family. She also told of a visit to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes a short time before, when she "talked" to him. Noticing her words as she spoke, there were but four which I did not really understand. These I asked her to spell on her fingers. Her enjoyment of this, her first experience in the real use of speech, was touchingly expressed in her remark to Miss Sullivan on her way home, "I am not dumb now." In a



conversation, some two weeks later, with Dr. Bell, Miss Sullivan, and myself, a still greater freedom in the use of speech was noticeable. Miss Sullivan fully appreciated the victory gained; for she wrote to Mr. Anagnos, two months after Helen had taken her first lesson, "Think of it! Helen achieved in less than two months what it takes the pupils of schools for the deaf several years to accomplish, and then they do not speak as plainly as she does." Helen's own joy in this conscious possession of a new power was shown in the following letter she wrote me a week or so after she had taken her first lesson. It also reveals the origin of her desire for speech.

SOUTH BOSTON, MASS., *April 3, 1890.*

*My Dear Miss Fuller:*

My heart is full of joy this beautiful morning because I have learned to speak many new words, and I can make a few sentences. Last evening I went out in the yard and spoke to the moon. I said, "O moon, come to me!" Do you think the lovely moon was glad that I could speak to her? How glad my mother will be. I can hardly wait for June to come, I am so eager to speak to her and to my precious little sister. Mildred could not understand me when I spelled with my fingers, but now she will sit in my lap, and I will tell her many things to please her, and we shall be so happy together. Are you very, very happy because you can make so many people happy? I think you are very kind and patient, and I love you very dearly. My teacher told me Tuesday that you wanted to know how I came to wish to talk with my mouth. I will tell you all about it, for I remember my thoughts perfectly. When I was a very little child I used to sit in my mother's lap nearly all the time, because I was very timid, and did not like to be left by myself. And I would keep my little hand on her face all the while, because it amused me to feel her face and lips move when she talked with people. I did not know then what she was doing, for I was quite ignorant of all things. Then, when I was older, I learned to play with my nurse and the little negro children, and I noticed that they kept moving their lips like my mother, so I moved mine, too, but sometimes it made me angry, and I would hold my playmates' mouths very hard. I did not know then that it was very naughty to do so. After a long time my dear teacher came to me, and taught me to communicate with my fingers, and I was satisfied and happy. But when I came to school in Boston I met some deaf people who talked with their mouths like all other people, and one day a lady who had



been to Norway came to see me, and told me of a blind and deaf girl she had seen in that far-away land who had been taught to speak and understand others when they spoke to her. This good and happy news delighted me exceedingly, for then I was sure that I should learn also. I tried to make sounds like my little playmates, but teacher told me that the voice was very delicate and sensitive and that it would injure it to make incorrect sounds, and promised to take me to see a kind and wise lady who would teach me rightly. That lady was yourself. Now I am as happy as the little birds, because I can speak, and perhaps I shall sing too. All of my friends will be so surprised and glad.

Your loving little pupil,

HELEN A. KELLER.

From her home in Alabama, where she went in June, Helen expressed this same joy in the use of speech when she wrote to Mr. Anagnos (July 4, 1890): "I am so happy now. I never was so happy in my life before. When you come home you will take me in your lap and I will speak to you." She said her talking was a beautiful surprise to her father and mother, for she had not written them that she had been learning to speak. "Are you not very glad," she adds, "that I can talk, and that everybody understands me?"

In October she wrote me another letter which, as given here, will reveal her loving personality and progress more than any words I could give.

TUSCUMBIA, ALABAMA, *October 20, 1890.*

*My Dear Miss Fuller:*

Oh, no! I have not forgotten you, dear friend! I have thought of you every day, and I love you more than ever. I will tell you why I have not written before. After I came home I was sick for a while, and the doctor said I must be very quiet and not get tired or I would be very ill. We all went away to a beautiful mountain, where it was cool and pleasant, and I did nothing but play and ride my dear donkey. You must know I had a lovely time climbing the steep paths, and gathering the pretty wild flowers. Lioness, my great, faithful mastiff, always went with us. When we were tired and sat down on a fallen tree to rest she would roll in the leaves or lie

quietly at our feet. Sometimes the rain came down in torrents; then we stayed in the house and amused ourselves. Mildred and our little cousin, Louise Adams, were very happy together. I used to swing them in the hammock and have fun with them. They could understand all that I said to them, and sometimes I could tell what they said by feeling their lips. Are you not delighted because I can speak so well! My dog comes bounding to me when I call her, and all of my friends know what I say if I speak distinctly. I have learned a great deal about my loving heavenly Father, and the dear Christ. I am very, very happy. God wants us to be happy. I think he wanted you to teach me to speak because he knew how much I wished to speak like other people. He did not want his child to be dumb, and when I go to him He will let his angels teach me to sing. I wonder if your beautiful new school is finished. You must give my dear love to all the children and the teachers. I hope they have not forgotten Helen. When I see you I shall have very much to tell you. I am studying every day and learning all I can about plants, and numbers, and the beautiful world our Father has given us. I am so glad that we shall live always, because there are so many wonderful things to learn about. Teacher sends love and little sister sends a kiss.

Lovingly, your little friend,

HELEN A. KELLER.

From time to time I noted the improvement of this remarkable girl in the use of speech, and I am free to confess that one of the great joys of my life was when, six years after the first lessons, it was my privilege not only to suggest her as a speaker for the Fifth Summer meeting of the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf at the Pennsylvania Institution at Mt. Airy, but to see and hear the successful effort. The speech written out by herself on the typewriter, was committed to memory and now repeated without a mistake. I cannot refrain from giving it here that others may see its spirit and form of expression. Like the letters, it tells its own story better than anything I could say.

#### ADDRESS OF HELEN KELLER.

If you knew all the joy I feel in being able to speak to you to-day I think you would have some idea of the value of speech to the deaf, and you would

understand why I want every little deaf child in all this great world to have an opportunity to learn to speak. I know that much has been said and written on this subject, and that there is a wide difference of opinion among teachers of the deaf in regard to oral instruction. It seems very strange to me that there should be this difference of opinion; I cannot understand how any one interested in our education can fail to appreciate the satisfaction we feel in being able to express our thoughts in living words. Why, I use speech constantly, and I cannot begin to tell you how much pleasure it gives me to do so. Of course, I know that it is not always easy for strangers to understand me; but it will be by and by; and in the meantime I have the unspeakable happiness of knowing that my family and friends rejoice in my ability to speak. My little sister and baby brother love to have me tell them stories in the long summer evenings when I am at home, and my mother and teacher often ask me to read to them from my favorite books. I also discuss the political situation with my dear father, and we decide the most perplexing questions quite as satisfactorily to ourselves as if I could hear and see. So you see what a blessing speech is to me. It brings me into closer and tenderer relationship with those I love, and makes it possible for me to enjoy the sweet companionship of a great many persons from whom I should be entirely cut off if I could not talk.

I can remember the time before I learned to speak, and how I used to struggle to express my thoughts by means of the manual alphabet—how my thoughts used to beat against my finger tips like little birds striving to gain their freedom, until one day Miss Fuller opened wide the prison door and let them escape. I wonder if she remembers how eagerly and gladly they spread their wings and flew away. Of course it was not easy at first to fly. The speech-wings were weak and broken, and had lost all the grace and beauty that had once been theirs; indeed, nothing was left save the impulse to fly, but that was something. One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar. But, nevertheless, it seemed to me sometimes that I could never use my speech wings as God intended I should use them; there were so many difficulties in the way, so many discouragements; but I kept on trying, knowing that patience and perseverance would win in the end. And while I worked I built the most beautiful air-castles, and dreamed dreams, the pleasantest of which was of the time when I should talk like other people; and the thought of the pleasure it would give my mother to hear my voice once more sweetened every effort, and made every failure an incentive to try harder next time. So I want to say to those who are trying to learn to speak, and to those who are teaching them, “Be of good cheer. Do not think of to-day’s failures, but of the success that may come to-morrow. You have set yourself a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere; and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles—a delight in climbing rugged paths which you would perhaps never know if you did not sometimes slip backwards; if the road was always smooth and pleasant. Remember, no effort that we make to attain something beauti-



ful is ever lost. Sometime, somewhere, somehow, we shall find that which we seek. We shall speak, yes, and sing too, as God intended we should speak and sing."

As introduced by Mr. Bell, Helen had already given a peculiar charm to the opening of the convention by having recited the Twenty-third Psalm.

Not only in the public convention, but in the private club and school, has this use of speech been a joy to her and a wonder to others. Only the year after she began to talk she surprised her teachers, with whom she was a guest at Abbot Academy, by stepping forward after one of them had spoken and saying, "I would like to say something to my friends." After thanking them all for their kindness, with her sightless eyes turned toward heaven, she referred to the world being full of goodness, beauty, and love written on the walls of nature all around them.

The Young Ladies' Club of Baddeck, Nova Scotia, will never forget the suggestive remarks she made at the summer home of Dr. Bell in 1901. After expressing her joy in meeting the young ladies of Baddeck, she said, "Here in this beautiful home love is supreme; we see it in every flower; we hear it in the music that sings itself inside and outside our hearts. It makes everything beautiful. Here our griefs, our deprivations, our failures, are made to blossom like Aaron's rod with flowers." People often asked, she said, if she were happy, since it seemed strange that one who couldn't see or hear should be able to enter into the joys of life. "That is because they do not understand the power of love," she declared. "By its magic one perceives that everything has its wonders—even darkness and silence." Then follows thought, which not coming as it does from darkness and silence, startles with its power and exalts with its beauty. "The eye cannot follow the flight of song, the ear cannot hear the music in

the heart that receives it, but the spirit knows no limitations. It may follow the song to the utmost boundary of the heavens, and in the inner silence of thought listen to the 'music of the spheres.' "

Such thought, well spoken, from one blind and deaf from the age of nineteen months, is one of the marvels of this progressive age.

Respectfully submitted,

SARAH FULLER,  
*Principal of Horace Mann School for the Deaf.*





VOLTA BUREAU,  
FOR THE INCREASE AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE RELATING TO THE DEAF  
WASHINGTON CITY, U. S. A.

LETTER  
OF  
HELEN A. KELLER

*Reprint from American Annals of the Deaf,  
February, 1899, Vol. XLIV, No. 2.*

GIBSON BROS., PRINTERS AND BOOKBINDERS.  
1899.



*Helen Keller.*—Miss Helen Adams Keller is now continuing her preparation for Radcliffe College under the guidance of Mr. Merton S. Keith, of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In a recent letter Mr. Keith said that she was progressing finely, having nearly finished Algebra, done four out of the five books in Geometry, two orations of Cicero, one book of the Iliad, and considerable Vergil and Greek composition. The following extracts from a private letter written by Helen on the twenty-third of October last will be read with interest:

12 NEWBURY STREET, BOSTON, MASS.

This is the first opportunity I have had to write to you since we came here last Monday. We have been in such a whirl ever since we decided to come to Boston: it seemed as if we should never get settled. However, teacher says we are "settled" and I believe we are; for our room begins to have a familiar homelike air about it, although nobody in the house has spoken to us yet, except the boarding mistress. It seems rather odd to me to live like this, but I rather enjoy the novelty.

Mr. Keith comes here at half past three every day except Saturday. He says he prefers to come here for the present. I am reading the "Iliad," and the "Æneid," and Cicero, besides doing a lot in Geometry and Algebra. The Iliad is beautiful with its myth and grace and simplicity of a wonderfully childlike people, while the "Æneid" is more stately and reserved. It is like a beautiful maiden who always lived in a palace surrounded by a magnificent court, while the Iliad is like a splendid youth who has had the earth for his playground.

The weather has been awfully dismal all the week, but to-day is beautiful, and our room floor is flooded with sunlight. By and by we shall take a little walk in the Public Gardens. I wish the Wrentham woods were around the corner, but alas! they are not, and I shall have to content myself with a stroll in the gardens. Somehow, after the great fields and pastures and lofty pine groves of the country, they seem shut in and conventional. Even the trees seem citified and self-conscious. Indeed, I doubt if they are on speaking terms with their country cousins! Do you know, I cannot help feeling sorry for these trees with all their fashionable airs? They are like the people whom they see every day, who prefer the crowded noisy city to the quiet and freedom of the country. They do not even suspect how circumscribed their lives are. They look down pityingly on the country folk, who have never had an opportunity "to see the great world." Oh my! if they only realized their limitations, they would flee for their lives to the woods and fields.



But what nonsense is this ! You will think I am pining away for my beloved Wrentham, which is true in one sense and not in another. I do miss Red Farm and the dear ones there dreadfully ; but I am not unhappy ; I have teacher and my books and I have the certainty that something sweet and good will come to me in this great city, where human beings struggle so bravely all their lives to bring happiness from cruel circumstances. Anyway, I am glad to have my share in life, whether it be bright or sad.

Affectionately, your friend,

HELEN KELLER.

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